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The art collection of the United Nations

Origins, institutional framework and ongoing tensions

Mafalda Dâmaso

Introduction

The United Nations Art Collection, exhibited in the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York and in other duty stations worldwide, is mostly composed of official gifts offered to the UN by its member states. This chapter will argue that the collection foregrounds the core contradiction of the UN, that is, between its international values and responsibilities and its modus operandi, which remains nation-centric. The chapter will describe the origins of the collection, analyse its current institutional framework, describe how it reflects the organisational contradictions of the UN and identify the audiences of the collections. Throughout this analysis, the art collection will emerge as a platform in which the member states and the UN deploy soft power – a notion that is briefly related to that of cultural diplomacy.

Uniting these sections is the argument that the collection reflects, in different ways, the institutional ambivalence of the UN itself (serving an international community in whose name it was created yet funded and organised according to the logic of the nation-state).¹ This tension reveals the limits of the use of art by political institutions to reinforce a specific message when the different parties do not agree with the transfer of certain powers to said institution – in this case, the ability of the UN to develop and communicate a position of its own in relation to ongoing international affairs debates (which would be reflected in the curation by the UN of its own exhibitions using its art collection, for example).

Origins and goals

It is difficult to find details of the origins of the collection of the UN. However, the existing evidence points to the collection originating from a combination of, on the one hand, the personal interest in the arts of the first UN Secretary General and, on the other hand, practical concerns regarding the need to decorate its New York headquarters:

appropriate decoration of the Headquarters was an early concern of the architects who planned the buildings. The theme of peace was reflected in many of the first offerings.

Two huge murals representing “War” and “Peace”, by the Brazilian artist Candido Portinari, dominate the Delegates’ Lobby of the General Assembly building, along with Belgium’s mural tapestry, “Triumph of Peace”, one of the largest ever woven [...]. A mural by José Vela Zanetti of the Dominican Republic titled “Mankind’s Struggle for a Lasting Peace” was the gift of the Guggenheim Foundation [...]. Iran, Iraq and Turkey have given interesting replicas of ancient peace treaties.

(Urquhart 1995, p. i)

Although I will focus on its artworks, the collection also includes historic objects, all of which have been donated as gifts to the UN by its member states, associations or individuals. Additionally, each UN headquarters (Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi) has its own collection. This said, the total number of objects included in the collection (let alone in each office) is unclear. Michael Adlerstein, Assistant Secretary-General and Executive Director of the Capital Master Plan (CMP), i.e. of the renovation plan of the New York headquarters, said in a 2014 interview that there were 311 gifts listed in the UN’s inventory; however, there isn’t a complete registry listing all the elements of the collection. This uncertainty is evident in another of Adlerstein’s statements – who also belongs to the collection’s committee:

We also continuously have loans from different museums or Member States [...]. There is more art in Geneva, Nairobi, Bangkok, and Vienna and in all of the regional offices. *I think* there is far more art than in the New York Headquarters but *I would assume* that we have the largest collection in the organisation.

(Adlerstein 2014, p. 152; emphasis my own)

The elements of the collection are exhibited not only in the New York headquarters but also in other duty stations worldwide (for example, The United Nations Office at Geneva inherited a considerable number of works of art from the League of Nations – see UNOG, no date and International Geneva 2012). Interestingly, the growth of the collection accompanied that of the UN.

The diverse permanent collection of art here has tripled in size [...]. The growth in the number of art objects has roughly paralleled the growth in membership – from 51 nations in 1946, when it was decided to build the headquarters here, to 157 today.

(Blair 1983)²

But this momentum has since slowed down, as has the number of donations. Moreover, one must note a recent change in the UN’s position vis-à-vis said donations, even if that was due to practical constraints rather than to wider strategic or policy changes.

In the early days of the UN, some gifts were donated by foundations and by the city of New York and by others that were invited to gift. Since that time, the number of gifts has grown significantly. Wall space has become in high demand so that at this point in time, we prefer gifts from Member States, and this is the Member States’ preference as well [...]. We have had a pause for the Capital Master Plan where we have not received gifts for the past six years, because there is too much construction going on [...]. Part of what the Arts Committee tries to do is to make sure we do not get overwhelmed with art.

(Adlerstein 2014, p. 152)

That is, today every member can only make one offer and is also responsible for the installation of the offered artefacts. Additionally, as Adlerstein mentions, the renovation of the headquarters (the Capital Master Plan) between 2008 and 2015 led to a pause in the growth of the collection – which is likely to continue due to space constraints.

Although I cannot discuss all the elements of the collection, it is important to mention some of its particularly well-known pieces. The first is Marc Chagall's 1964 stained-glass piece. This memorial to those who died in the plane crash that killed Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General, in Africa during the Congo crisis in 1961, was gifted by the artist and by the United Nations staff in 1964.

Peace is filled with symbolism of peace drawn from the New Testament and depicted in the artist's signature swirling, dreamlike style. Imagery includes a young boy representing the Biblical "Prince of Peace," the Tree of Knowledge amid a pastoral setting from the Garden of Eden, Christ on the cross, and an angel bestowing the Ten Commandments to the residents of a walled city. References to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (a favorite of Hammarskjöld's) also figure throughout.

(Halcyon 2015)

Barbara Hepworth's *Single Form* (1961–64), a stone sculpture surrounded by water and with a slightly off-center hole, was also donated in memory of the late Secretary General. Indeed, it was gifted 'on a grant from Jacob Blaustein, a former member of the United States delegation' (Blair 1983). Finally, a bronze statue of a reclining figure by the British sculptor Henry Moore (the eighth of nine castings of a plaster executed in 1979–80) and positioned at the entrance to the Secretariat building, is also a memorial to Hammarskjöld – who wished that one work of the sculptor would be included in the collection. In fact,

the second Secretary General of the United Nations, the Swede Dag Hammarskjöld, had a special relationship with the arts. He saw in them important 'Ambassadors of Hope' after the Second World War. Hammarskjöld [...] laid the foundation for the great art collection of the United Nations [...].

(Theill 2014, p. 168)

Apart from artworks, as I mentioned earlier, the collection includes tapestries from countries such as China and Iran, sculptures from Nigeria, Mali and others, furniture, a peace bell from Japan, a third-century mosaic mural donated by Tunisia in 1961 and a 3000-year-old ceremonial mantle received in 1957 from Peru, among others. Finally, it also includes more unconventional elements.

Hanging in a Secretariat building corridor is a small painting by an amateur presented by the artist in 1978. "Please accept this small painting as a gift of peace from me in this Year of the Child," said an accompanying letter, signed, Muhammad Ali.

(Blair 1983)

This gift is interesting in that it highlights the gradual openness of the UN to celebrities and, most recently, to public relations (Cooper and Frechette 2015). But it also reveals that this is indeed an extremely varied collection. For example, in 1955 the Netherlands offered the UN a Foucault pendulum, which moves according to earth's rotation – a non-artistic work that supports the idea of the UN as representing the globe and hence the international community.

Indeed, in its whole, the collection is often described as representing the ideals and the values of the UN as an international organisation. Its former Secretary-General wrote that

the art displayed at the United Nations – at its Headquarters in New York, offices in Geneva and Vienna, regional commissions, and more than twenty agencies and programmes of the United Nations system – reflects the diversity of cultures and historical traditions of the Member States, and therefore of humanity itself.

(Boutros-Ghali 1995, p. 9)

However, it is impossible to find any institutional evidence that this aim (representing humanity as well as addressing or representing the central values of the UN) is indeed the goal of the collection. Rather, the idea that it showcases the richness of the world's cultures seems to have emerged as a retrospective justification for its existence. The fact is that the collection doesn't

have a single mission or purpose or selecting group. It is a collection which has been donated by the Member States and reflects their impression of what they would like the world to see of their culture or of the UN mission.

(Adlerstein 2014, p. 152)

The next sections will reveal that this lack of clarity or ambivalence is also reflected, on the one hand, on the institutional framework of the collection (a committee with very limited independence and powers, which reflects a broader tension at the core of the UN regarding the nature of sovereignty) and, on the other hand, on the multiple audiences that are served by it (which is associated with its use as an instrument of soft power, as will be argued).

Institutional framework

First, when presenting an official gift to the UN, the member states must follow specific procedures, including giving speeches and attending ceremonies, which are coordinated by the Protocol and Liaison Service. Indeed, there 'are frequently gifts from member nations, often to commemorate an anniversary or the appointment of a new Secretary General' (Halcyon, 2015). The act of making a donation to the collection can be interpreted as either a public demonstration of agreement with the values of the UN or as a way to increase the visibility of a specific member state within the UN. In any case, such an act reveals an implicit agreement with the importance of the UN as an inter-governmental organisation. However, the fact that the donor remains the holder of the rights of the artwork also attests to the refusal to provide it a supranational status – which, as we will see later, further reinforces the ambivalence and the non-independence of the collection.

Second, the collection is managed by an art committee that meets when needed, composed of nine UN staff members.³ Its functions are to establish policies to be followed by the Secretary-General regarding the gifts offered to the collection, to recommend their acceptance or rejection and to assist with their management. Interestingly, Adlerstein is very open regarding the fact that the elements of the committee aren't invited based on their knowledge of art but, rather,

because we are in fields of endeavor that the Secretary-General needs to pay attention to, political affairs and facilities and public information [...]. We do not have the actual staff experienced in art curation.

(2014, p. 153)

This said, the UN originally invited art specialists to join this board.

The arts committee used to be composed of both Secretariat officials and outside experts. But, Mr. Urquhart said, the outsiders “dwindled away out of frustration” by the mid-1970’s [sic]. “I don’t remember we accomplished very much, and we sort of disbanded ourselves,” said Elizabeth Parkinson Cobb, a former president of the Museum of Modern Art, who left the committee in 1975. “We had to accept everything, whether we liked it or not”.

(Blair 1983)

The fact that the committee was (and still is) forced to accept all offers highlights the fact that the collection isn’t built from the point of view of either experts or artists – i.e. as a curated section of objects representing the values of the UN. Rather, the collection ‘represents the diversity of each member’s art’ (Williams 2014, p. 152). This absence of power to reject specific artworks also reiterates – again, implicitly – the sovereignty of each member state. This might also explain why the committee subsequently diminished in size, before expanding again with the arrival of political advisors. As the journalist Nicole Winfield wrote in a piece for the Los Angeles Times in 2000,

the U.N. Arts Committee, which chooses what gifts from U.N. countries get placed where, consists of a single person – one of Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s top political advisors who has no fine arts background. Indeed, the business of art at the United Nations is hardly artistic. It’s politics and diplomacy at its most basic. Diplomats try to score subtle political points through their gifts to the organization, and U.N. officials try desperately to avoid insulting any country when the organization has to object to, reject or otherwise intervene over an offering. “I see my work more as being in the realm of diplomacy than in the realm of curatorship,” concedes arts committee chairman Alvaro de Soto, who on most days carries the title of U.N. assistant secretary-general for political affairs.

This committee is the main entity responsible for the conservation of the collection. However, restoration work, for example, requires returning the artworks to the member states that donated them. The absence of power of the UN is also evident in the fact that changes to the location of the artworks require its previous acceptance by the donors. This is one of the reasons why, in the report ‘Managing Works of Art in the United Nations’ (1992), the UN Joint Inspection Unit made several recommendations to the Security Council, including the reorganisation of the Arts Committee and stronger clarity regarding the responsibility for the artworks. Such recommendations included the following:

Recommendation One: That the Secretary-General make proposals to the General Assembly at the earliest possible date for adoption by Member States of an arts policy for the United Nations.

Recommendation Two: That the Secretary-General undertake the reorganization and strengthening of the arts committee, specifying its composition and terms of reference [...].

Recommendation Three: That the Secretary-General inform Member States of the specific and details measures he [sic] plans to take to develop, preserve and safeguard the arts collection of the United Nations, including his [sic] proposed programmes for registry, evaluation, conservation, insurance and protection.

Recommendation Four: That the Secretary-General, in the interest of an effective arts policy over the long term, should engage a professional curator to assure the relevance, coherence and value of the United Nations collection.

(UN Joint Inspection Unit 1992, p. ii)

Although it was published 15 years ago, its recommendations are yet to be enacted. Nonetheless, Adlerstein recently affirmed that ‘the terms of reference for the Arts Committee and the management of the gifts is presently in review again by the Arts Committee [...]. The donor is responsible for the maintenance of the art’ (Adlerstein 2014, p. 155). This said, the UN does have some elements of responsibility for the collection. As he stated,

the budget for art is *sort of* under the umbrella of the Office of Central Support Services (OCSS), Department of Management. They manage the Art Collection. They manage it on a day-to-day basis; they clean it; they paint the walls; they move the art off the wall in order to do the maintenance of the building [...]. The curatorial work is done by the Member States, so there is not a significant work load [sic] for us. Most of the staff involved, including the Arts Committee, treats this part of their work as collateral duty.

(Adlerstein 2014, p. 155; emphasis my own)

The responsibility of the member states for the curatorial work is particularly interesting. Once again, this reiterates the fact that the UN (in this case, via the art committee) is unable to function as an authority responsible for establishing a narrative connecting the different artworks. This is important because doing so would require connecting the positions of individual states and relating them to ongoing discussions in the UN’s fora. This absence of power is also evident in the committee’s role (or lack thereof) in evaluating the appropriateness of gifts and, subsequently, in their rejection. According to Adlerstein,

there are no specific criteria for what makes a work of art unacceptable. The purpose of the Arts Committee is to give the Secretary-General its opinion to determine if a gift might be inappropriate. Generally speaking, the UN avoids gifts that might be offensive to Member States or to any particular group.

(2014, p. 154)

However, as Winfield notes in her piece, there is indeed evidence of previous rejections.

Urquhart [...] recalls having to politely decline a gift from an unnamed Pacific island ambassador to display a prized, stuffed coelacanth – a prehistoric fish. A decomposing animal, Urquhart remembers arguing, was perhaps not an appropriate addition.

(2000)

Williams also describes a further conflict between the committee and those who wanted to give yet another object to the collection. Reading the full quote suggests how politically charged such decisions are.

Mihail Simeonov, a Bulgarian sculptor, in 1980 had had the idea of felling an African elephant with narcotic darts and making a mold in latex, to be cast later in bronze—five tons of it. The idea was taken up by Austrian former Secretary General of the Socialist

International Hans Janitschek who worked at the UN. He set up the “Cast the Elephant Trust” as a not-for-profit. The Secretariat breathed a sigh of relief—they were under no obligation to accept gifts from NGOs [...]. However, Janitschek enlisted three elephant-populated countries as sponsors, Nepal, Malawi and Namibia, so the UN had to give way

(2014, pp. 150–151)

Altogether, and despite their brevity, these stories reveal that the committee is very limited in its powers to evaluate the inappropriateness of the artworks that it receives, which it can only do in regard to conservation issues (as well as, potentially, other safety issues) and if there is reason to believe that other member states or groups might find such gifts offensive. The practical consequence of this situation is clear: gifts that do not explicitly oppose a specific member state or group must be accepted, leaving the door open to objects that do so implicitly, as I will discuss later.

Two central issues have emerged from this initial analysis: on the one hand, the absence of institutional autonomy of the committee; on the other hand, the role of political influence in the expansion of the collection. They reflect a broader institutional conflict, as I will now discuss.

Organisational contradictions

The management of the collection can be seen as reiterating the argument made by Seth Center, an historian in the American Department of State, in ‘The United Nations Department of Public Information: Intractable Dilemmas and Fundamental Contradictions’ (2009). Center proposes that the work of the communication and public relations department of the UN foregrounds the core contradictions of the institution, such as that between its international values and responsibilities and its *modus operandi*, which is nation-centric.

This tension is reflected in the art collection: despite being described as belonging to the UN, as we have seen the artworks belong to the nation states (which would have to give permission for the use of the former in support of any specific curatorial narrative). In light of this, and following Center, the strategic challenges faced by the UN collection emerge as inherent to the nature of the UN. Let us consider in detail his discussion of what he views as the contradictory aims served by the Department of Public Information (DPI), which is responsible for the communication of the UN.

While the UN General Assembly is infamous as a forum for member states’ propaganda, the United Nations bureaucracy maintains, at least in principle, an ethos of impartiality in global affairs, a culture of deference to its member states, and an adherence to the principle of state sovereignty. This situation has produced intractable dilemmas in the formulation and execution of UN information policy.

(2009, pp. 886–887)

That is, Center proposes that despite the recent attempted reorganisation of the public relations of the UN, its mission and institutional nature oppose the possibility of a fully unified communication strategy. He illustrates this argument with an analysis of the history of the DPI, focusing both on earlier tensions and on the multiple reorganisations to which it has been subjected during the last twenty years. In particular, Center argues that, during the Cold War, and with regard to controversial issues such as assigning responsibility for the Korean War,

too much “objective” information was sure to alienate one of the two superpowers and lead to charges of partiality [...]. In seeking to adhere to the ethos of impartiality, the DPI elided controversial issues [...]. The DPI consistently strove to avoid singling out individual states for approbation in its treatment of global issues because of the implicit challenge to state sovereignty and the exigency of impartiality.

(2009, p. 891)

Nonetheless, and crucially, Center argues that

the DPI has found a formula that produced an uneasy détente in the historical conflict over the means and ends of UN information policy. The DPI and wider UN information efforts embrace activism in the conduct of information policy, but abjure politicization in the content.

(2009, p. 896)

There are further complications in analysing the relationship between the UN and its member states. For instance, as Anne-Marie Slaughter demonstrates (2005), the term sovereignty is itself contested, and its scholarly understanding has gradually shifted away from a Westphalian, zero-sum understanding. Instead, authors such as Kal Raustiala (2003) and Abram Chayes and Antonia Handler Chayes (1995) propose to see it as flexible and expandable. In this view, when a state makes the decision to join an international organisation with supranational elements (hence partly limiting one’s own powers), the result is an expansion of the autonomy of said state. This is because such membership allows it to participate in a wider pool of resources (economic, military, diplomatic and others).

However, this dualism – between the mission of the UN and the sovereignty of the individual member states – isn’t exclusive to the UN; rather, it could be seen as an example of a tension that is inherent to international or supranational organisations. This tension is clear when one reads Tuuli Lähdesmäki’s (2012) discussion of the role played by the rhetoric of the European Union’s (EU’s) cultural policy in the context of its aim to strengthen the unification of its member states. Lähdesmäki notices a central contradiction in an analysis of four cases – the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Agenda for Culture, the EU’s European Capital of Culture programme (ECC) and specifically the Pécs, Hungary ECC programme in 2010:

the fundamental aim of the cultural policy of the EU is to stress the obvious cultural diversity of Europe, and at the same time, find some underlying common elements which unify the diverse cultures of Europe. Through these common elements, the EU’s policy produces an imagined cultural community of Europe (Sassatelli 2002, p. 436) which is ‘united in diversity’, as one of the slogans of the Union states.

(Lähdesmäki 2012, p. 59)

Further, cultural elements are critical in communicating the values of the European Union:

pan-Europeanists or cosmopolitans have thus stressed the role of the cosmopolitan aspects of culture in the creation of Europe – even on the administrative level in the EU – as is suggested, e.g., by the selection of Beethoven’s Ode to Joy as the EU’s anthem.

(Delanty 2000, p. 226; Lähdesmäki 2012, pp. 63–64)

To be more specific, Lähdesmäki is here referring to the fact that, when applying for the European City of Culture programme, interested cities must demonstrate that they have contributed significantly to European culture. At the same time, “the guide and the ECC decisions both emphasize the significance of important historical figures in the making of a ‘European dimension’ to the ECC events”, a practice that the author sees as mirroring ‘nationalist attempts to boost national self-esteem and create a national narration of history’ (Lähdesmäki 2012, pp. 66–68). This is why, broadly joining the analysis developed by Vivien Fryd (1994), which I will mention later, Lähdesmäki suggests that the role played by

common cultural heritage in the production of Europeanness can be interpreted as a reflection of the past colonialist ideology (see Palonen 2010) [...]. In a sense, the heritage is colonized by the EU for its identity political purposes [...]. The rhetoric tends to emphasize the heritage of ‘original’ Europeans [...] and draws attention [away] from the cultural and social problems of the present-day cultural diversity.

(2012, p. 72)

Although I do agree that, in an analogous manner, the UN collection can undoubtedly be seen as unveiling the institutional complexity of the UN, I do not believe that the term colonisation and its logic apply to this case (and, before the conclusion, I question whether the logic of colonisation applies at all). Rather, the comparison between the art collection of the UN and the European City of Culture reveals exactly the opposite: the collection is a vehicle for multiple (and sometimes contradictory) ‘national narration[s] of history’, as is identified by Lähdesmäki (2012, p. 68). This possibility emerges from the broader ambivalence that the collection exemplifies, as I will be arguing throughout this chapter: that between the mission of the UN (to represent and work in the name of the international community – as a supra-national organisation) and its implementation (which depends on the UN’s individual nation states – and, hence, as an international organisation with some supranational elements).

This ambivalence is also reflected in the lack of clarity regarding who the intended audiences of the collection are. As we will see, it has several overlapping audiences: the visitors of the headquarters of the UN (as well as of other offices) taking official tours of the buildings (UNESCO 2010); the UN staff, national civil servants and other individuals who are able to visit parts of the headquarters of the UN (as well as other offices) that are closed to the general public; finally, the global public, who has access to the collection through media stories about the donations.

The audiences of the collection

As Edward Marks mentions in his piece in *A World of Art: The United Nations Collection* (1995), the only publication dedicated to the collection, the intended audience (or audiences) of the collection is (or are) not immediately clear. Elements of the collection are mentioned during tours of the headquarters in New York (see Gimlette 2012). UNESCO’s headquarters (in Paris) also offer guided tours to the public (see UNESCO, no date).⁴ However, there is a second audience that only partly overlaps with that of the participants in its tours. Indeed, Marks writes that

quite a number of these artworks, for security and other reasons, are not accessible to the public, even in those buildings where there are guided tours. They are seen only by UN staff, delegates of member nations and visitors on official business. Since they are not in museums or established galleries, their existence is relatively unknown, even to art connoisseurs.

(1995, p. 15)

In a similar direction, in the interview that was quoted earlier, Adlerstein states that ‘a lot of the collection is not visible to the public because it is in the delegates’ areas. The delegates enjoy the collection, it is their art, and it is their house’ (2014, p. 152). That is, the collection is seen as having a similar identity-building effect in these two audiences (those who visit the headquarters of the UN and other offices as either visitors or as members of staff), clearly communicating the values and the diversity of the institution. This experience, if it does indeed take place, has important consequences. To understand why, it’s enough to read Carol Duncan’s ‘The Art Museum as Ritual’ (1995), in which the art historian discusses the values associated with the buildings that house public art collections and argues that ‘to control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths’ [...] (Duncan 1995, p. 8). Crucially, however, Duncan stresses not the role of collections but that of visitors:

In art museums, it is the visitors who enact the ritual [...]. The museum’s larger narrative structure stands as a frame and gives meaning to individual works [...]. A ritual experience is thought to have a purpose, an end. It is seen as transformative: it confers or renews identity or purifies or restores order in the self or to the world through sacrifice, ordeal, or enlightenment.

(1995, pp. 12–13)

Nonetheless, such statements highlight the need for research aimed at understanding how visitors from different cultural, social and national backgrounds interpret the art collection of the UN and to test to what extent its visit might be associated with the enactment, to use Duncan’s words (1995, p. 478), of a stronger sense of belonging to the international community, as suggested by Adlerstein. In a similar direction, Susan Pearce also discusses the role of museums in constructing or sustaining specific identities in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, in which she analyses museums such as the Louvre. Pearce demonstrates that

museums can be powerful identity-defining machines. To control a museum is to control the representation of a community and some of its highest most authoritative truths [...]. What we see and do not see in our prestigious art museums [...] involves the much larger questions of who constitutes the community.

(1992, p. 286)

Read in light of these comments, the UN art collection emerges as contributing to the definition of both its visitors and its professionals as part of a common group – the international community uniting peoples beyond borders and in the name of which the preamble of the Charter of the UN starts (‘We the peoples of the United Nations’, UN, 1945). Although this notion is discussed in the literature as legally complicated (Greenwood 2011), one can also interpret it rhetorically, i.e. as making the case for the relevance, and hence the legitimacy, of the UN itself.⁵ The collection can be read in the same way: as strengthening the idea that the global mission of the UN (to represent and advocate for the global community) is worthy of support. This is significant in that it attests that the UN, even without having the power to curate the artworks in a way that would organise them according to a supranational narrative, can use the collection to support its mandate.

It is also interesting to consider the partial closeness of the collection vis-à-vis the wider public in view of a further comment made by Adlerstein:

the UN Headquarters is not a museum. The UN could not afford to open itself up in a way of a museum, to open up all its floors on a regular basis, because the UN Headquarters is the functioning office of an inter-governmental organisation.

(2014, p. 155)

This quote suggests that contrarily to most art museums, which have as their main goal to disseminate their collections to audiences that are as broad as possible, evaluating the art collection of the UN exclusively based on those two dimensions (i.e. on its elements and on its dissemination within a multifaceted audience) would be limiting. Rather, as I will discuss in the following section, the art collection of the UN could also be seen as a platform for soft power. This idea is connected with the third audience of the collection: the global viewers who read or watch news pertaining to specific items within the collection. Indeed, the decision by nation states to contribute to the art collection of the UN is often accompanied by strong media campaigns.

This analysis resonates with the argument of Simon Mark in 'A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy' (2009), which affirms the importance of cultural diplomacy within public diplomacy, particularly in terms of the broader audiences the former reaches both domestically and internationally. Mark follows the definition of Mark Leonard (1997), who organises it (i.e. public diplomacy) into three tiers:

The first tier, short term, reactive news management, takes hours and days. The next tier, medium term strategic communications, takes months. The third tier, cultural diplomacy, is about the development of long-term relationships, and can take years.

(Mark 2009, p. 13)

That is, in this definition the audiences of cultural diplomacy also differ from those of public diplomacy because the former includes, contrarily to the latter, 'politicians, diplomats and other government officials' – an idea that is confirmed in the partial availability of the art collection to the visitors. In this view, the motivation for giving to the UN art collection is more complex than a simple one-sided demonstration of support towards the UN. This complexity – both in terms of audiences and, potentially, in motivation for giving – demands that one revisit the notion of soft power.

Soft power within the collection

Let us then consider some of the artworks included in the collection from the point of view of this hypothesis, i.e. to test whether their donation to the UN art collection may function as a form of soft power. As is well known, this term was originally defined by Joseph S. Nye Jr. (1990) in opposition to hard power (i.e. military and economic resources). Writing after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Nye opposed the idea of geopolitical multipolarity and affirmed that the United States was the major global potency, stressing the changing nature of power.

The appropriate response to the changes occurring in world politics today is not to abandon the traditional concern for the military balance of power, but to accept its limitations and to supplement it with insights about interdependence [...]. Creating and resisting linkages between issues [...] becomes the art of the power game. Political leaders use international institutions to discourage or promote such linkages.

(1990, pp. 156–158)

As examples of soft power, Nye mentions American culture and lifestyle,⁶ which allow the country 'to get its messages across and to affect the preferences of others' (1990, p. 169). By giving artworks to the art collection of the UN, member states are also 'getting their messages across', both within the UN and internationally. That is, they are potentially reinforcing their positions in regard to ongoing geopolitical disagreements or tensions as well as, in Nye's terminology, discouraging or promoting linkages (as we saw in the case of the elephant cast).

However, as Melissa Nisbett carefully demonstrates in 'Who Holds the Power in Soft Power?' (2016), Nye's discussion of the term has evolved and its definition remains unclear, particularly regarding its position within canonical discussions of power (not to mention the lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of practices inspired by the term). Specifically, the author argues that Nye's concept of soft power can be understood according to Steven Lukes's 1974 third dimension of power, which regards the ways individual beliefs and preferences are influenced by the powerful.

In the words of Joseph Nye (2004, p. 2), soft power is the ability "to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants". Soft power can therefore reside both in the realm of the imagination, as well as within some kind of operationalized action. Soft power involves the assimilation of thoughts, beliefs and values, through sometimes subtle and imperceptible means. This idea of the power to shape desires and beliefs maps very neatly onto the concept of soft power.

(Nisbett 2016, no page)

Nonetheless, I do think that the concept of soft power is relevant for this discussion in that it hints at the nation-centric order of the UN. As Nisbett suggests when she discusses the British approach to soft power and cultural diplomacy during the last 10 years (2016), while the latter strategy combined the goals of cooperation and competition with other nations, the more recent focus on soft power has mostly abandoned the idea of collaboration. To put it differently, soft power suggests and is associated with the idea of competition between states – namely, as I will now argue, regarding the visibility or the control of a narrative.

A well-known piece of the UN art collection that confirms this analysis is Evgeniy Vuchetich's *Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares* (1957), a bronze sculpture depicting a powerful man using a hammer to transform a sword, which was offered to the UN in 1959 by the former Soviet Union. Along the same ideological lines (albeit with a much more violent undertone, making the case for the continuous geopolitical relevance of the former Soviet potency), the Soviet Union also offered the UN Zurab Tsereteli's *Good Defeats Evil* (1990), another sculpture that depicts St. George slaying a dragon and that is composed of 'fragments of USS Pershing nuclear missiles and Soviet SS-20 missiles that were destroyed under the terms of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty' (Halcyon 2015).

Although this artwork fulfils the definition of appropriateness of the committee, it would be impossible not to read in it a subtle critique of the American stance in the Cold War. This cunning way of making a political statement without targeting a specific nation state as responsible for the current state of affairs is evident throughout the collection. It is worth quoting the journalist Ian Williams at length:

The visitor's hall to the General Assembly typifies the highs and lows of the collection. Going through doors with Ernest Cormier bas reliefs more reminiscent of the interwar art of the Palais des Nations in Geneva, visitors see a replica of Sputnik hanging in the air above a statue of Zeus, while visitors file past a moon rock in a glass case from the US [...].

Everyone seems too polite to point out the Chinese gift—the huge ivory carving celebrating the opening of the Chengtu–Kunming Railway, a period piece from 1974 representing a combination of Mao’s proletarian triumphalism and traditional Chinese artistry, contains the ivory from no less than eight dead elephants.

(Williams 2014, pp. 148–149)

All of these artworks have clear political undertones and reveal details about the particular geopolitical position of the nation states that gifted them. This is not only the case of the most evidently political pieces (such as those mentioned in Williams’s quote), but is also manifest when one considers the story of Per Krohg’s painting, which adorns the Security Council. In the essay ‘The iconology a new world order: Per Krohg’s paintings in the UN Security Nations’ (2014), the art historian Maria Veie Sandvik argues that Krohg received his mandate from the Norwegian architect Arnstein Arneberg, who was commissioned to design the chamber and was a good friend of the first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie. Although there is no evidence that Arnsberg played a direct role in this selection, neither are there historical records of an open tender.

Secretary-General Lie was apparently able to place the order completely to Norway, although the country paid only for the decoration of the hall [...]. Members of the Art Board at UN Headquarters, who had to evaluate proposals for works of art in board-rooms, expressed strong reservations about the use of figurative painting [...]. But then a Royal Norwegian Decree of 7 January 1950 tied the donation of dollars 15 000 to the condition that Krohg’s work would be mounted in the hall of the Security Council.

(Sandvik 2014, p. 158)

Clearly, this incident may be read as attesting to Norway’s wish to take a central role within the UN even if it isn’t one of the permanent members of the Security Council.

Another example that is relevant in this context is the tapestry reproduction of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*. After being gifted by the Nelson Rockefeller Estate in 1985, it was placed in the corridor leading to the Security Council until 2009 and is now shown in Madrid’s Reina Sofia Museum (Halcyon 2015). Interestingly, in what points to the awareness of politicians and diplomats regarding the political undertones of the collection and their potential in supporting or opposing a political narrative, and following Colin Powell’s 2003 case in the Security Council for military intervention in Iraq (Dowd 2003), Picasso’s tapestry was famously covered by a cloth in order to avoid appearing in the background of Powell’s press conference.⁷

The idea that the artworks illustrate both the relations between the UN and those who gifted them and, at the same time, the political history of the latter goes in the direction of the analysis made by Vivien Fryd in ‘The Politics of Public Art: Art in the United States Capitol’ (1994), where the art historian analyses the art collection of the US Capitol building in Washington. Combining formal and iconographic art historical analysis with social and political history, Fryd discusses Thomas Crawford’s *Statue of Freedom* (which decorates its dome) and two artworks decorating the

central staircase of the Capitol’s east facade – Luigi Persico’s *Discovery of America* and Horatio Greenough’s *Rescue* [...]. An examination into the meanings of these state-supported sculptures reveal political controversies that involve slavery, ethnic identities, and racism against African Americans and Native Americans.

(Fryd 1994, p. 327)

Although a similar analysis of the potential controversies associated with the art collection of the UN would justify an even closer engagement with the collection, unfortunately it is impossible to do so within the constraints of this chapter. Nonetheless, to try to understand how the collection navigates similarly unresolved tensions, I can briefly consider a recently commissioned project by the UN resulting from an international competition: a memorial for the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.

Ark of Return (2015) by Haitian-American Rodney Leon is an abstract sculpture that is presented as a 'reminder of the bravery of those slaves, abolitionists and unsung heroes who managed to rise up against an oppressive system' (Ban Ki-moon quoted in Sanches 2013). The artist sees it as

a spiritual space of return [of the slave ships and slave trade routes], an 'Ark of Return, ' a vessel where we can begin to create a counter-narrative and undo some of that experience" [...]. Mr. Leon [...] hopes the monument can become both a pilgrimage for the public and a totem for dignitaries at the UN, reminding them [...] of mistakes made in the past. Highlighting some of the features of the monument, he notes the triangular marble panels [...]. "These three triangular patterns describe the slave routes from specific locations in West Africa and throughout Africa to South America, to the Caribbean and Central America, and to North America, " he says [...]. "It's about acknowledging that condition and thinking about future generations.

(UN 2015)

Nonetheless, and interestingly, these maps aren't truly specific; they fail to identify the countries that were (or still are) responsible for such practices. This resonates with a point made by Winfield on the absence of maps in the collection: 'with borders on nearly every continent in dispute, maps are considered too politically sensitive to be displayed as part of the vast U.N. art collection' (2000).

Despite not naming the member states responsible for the history of slavery, the *Ark of Return* reiterates the importance of the values and mission of the UN in identifying this issue as a tragic past that must be acknowledged and whose repetition must be avoided. Additionally, the artwork serves a narrative that has two audiences – the global media consumers and the individual nation states – and, by supporting unquestionable principles, cannot be criticised by the latter. This allows the UN to attempt to influence its members without opposing any of them directly, which exemplifies Center's argument (2009) regarding the ways the institutional ambiguity of the UN is reflected in its communications work. As a result of this analysis, the collection emerges as a platform of soft power, suggesting the existence of competition (following Nisbett's discussion) not only between the nation states but also between the UN and the former (i.e. between the international/supranational and the national levels).

In this context, it is important to consider to what extent similar artistic practices would be compatible with the strengthening of the role of the UN, namely in terms of setting a curatorial narrative. In this context, it is helpful to return briefly to the notion of cultural diplomacy. Mark (2009, p. 15), whom I referred to earlier, also sees public and cultural diplomacy as 'elements of soft power'. However, he stresses the need for changes in the implementation of cultural diplomacy, especially in terms of limiting political control over the delivery of cultural content. Similarly, ambassador Cynthia Schneider (2006) agrees with the need for its increased independence from political entities. This is because

cultural diplomacy when delivered through an independent entity is more likely to incorporate aspects of a state's culture opposed to, or critical of, a government, its policies or its performance [...]. [Hence, one should] establish an independent entity within a foreign service. It should be accountable to an independent board.

(2009, pp. 33–34)

Specifically, writing about the American case, the ambassador affirms that

Cultural diplomacy succeeded during the cold war in part because it allowed and even fostered dissent [...]. That the United States permitted critical voices as part of government-sponsored performances and emissaries astonished audiences everywhere, particularly behind the Iron Curtain.

(2006, p. 193)

This quote, stressing the importance of independent cultural practices, also goes in the direction of the argument made by Roger Blomgren's in 'Autonomy or Democratic Cultural Policy: that is the question' (2012), which discusses the role autonomy plays in cultural policy debates. Such independence is evident in the arm's length principle, which – as is well known – refers to the institutional settings that guarantee independence for cultural institutions and artists. In this model, cultural policy emerges as neutral regarding artistic content. By comparison, the autonomy of the art collection of the UN is extremely weak.

This said, one must stress that these discussions are focused on national practices. It could be argued that, at an international level, increased artistic independence and dissent would risk originating or increasing diplomatic conflicts, hence making the resolution of said issues (particularly when they require international collaboration) more difficult. Following this logic, if its art collection were to be given increased independence, the UN would have to strike a difficult balance between using the collection to highlight ongoing issues requiring increased attention from the international community and being respectful towards the history and current foreign policy positions of its member states.

Nonetheless, a compromise is possible. One can envisage strengthening the art collection of the UN as a form of cultural diplomacy serving the international community without 'colonising' (to use the terminology employed by Lähdesmäki 2012) the gifts of the nation states – it suffices to reiterate that any international organisation with supranational elements originates from the decision of its member states to transfer part of their sovereignty, as argued by Kal Raustiala's (2003, 846–847). In this direction, the curatorial work of the collection could be organised around a set of topics agreed to by majority in the General Assembly while avoiding shaming specific member states publicly: i.e. in the words of Center (2009, pp. 896), to actively 'embrace activism in the conduct of information policy' without politicising the content of said policies or, in this case, curatorial practices.

That is, even within these constraints it is possible to strengthen the institutional framework of the art collection of the UN and its potential in its communication strategy. If one were to expand the role of the collection in representing the UN and the international community rather than only its member states, that would require, first, a clear reformulation of its aims, as well as a clear redefinition of its framework and mission and, more broadly, of the strategy that it supports. This requirement is clear when one reads the four recommendations of the UN Joint Inspection Unit. Despite being from 1992, their urgency remains – particularly the need to strengthen the autonomy of the collection, professionalising the art committee and ensuring specific funding for the conservation of the collection and for dedicated staff.

Second, and more specifically, strengthening the autonomy of the art collection would require establishing new agreements between the donors and the UN (that is, making the donations gifts both de jure and de facto). Additionally, once there was a clear mission and dedicated staff, the UN could then curate the art collection and commission artists to engage with it. This said, it is important to reiterate that such curated exhibitions would have to strike a balance between communicating the values of the UN and respecting the principle of neutrality, i.e. to reveal the complexity associated with specific challenges facing the UN without assigning direct responsibilities for them. Doing so would finally allow the UN to use culture (through its art collection) strategically, joining some European member states who already do so (as evidenced in Fisher and Figueira, 2011). Indeed, although Rod Fisher and Carla Figueira argue that there isn't 'evidence of a paradigm shift in EU Member States cultural relations [...] to more strategically focused international cultural co-operation' (2011, p. 5), the report reveals nonetheless that 'cultural policy [has] become more strategically integrated into foreign policy objectives in some EU states' (2011, p. 14) – as is evident in the adoption by the European Council of the conclusions on the role of culture in the European Union's external relations (EU, 2017). Finally, it would also allow the art collection of the UN to be managed in a way that is consistent with the most recent discussions and definitions of sovereignty.

Conclusion

The analysis of the United Nations art collection foregrounded its lack of clarity in terms of its goals, the audiences that it serves and the motivation behind the donations. It was argued that this lack of clarity reflects the central tension between the sovereignty of the member states and the supranational order of the UN. However, the essay also highlighted the need for further research on this art collection, including a qualitative study of the experience of the audiences that see the collection dedicated to measuring its impact on their feelings or thoughts regarding their membership in the international community represented by the UN, as well as an analysis of the importance of the art collection in the organisation's communication strategy (and, particularly, within the work of the Department of Public Information). Two other studies emerge as crucial: a historical analysis of the process of commissioning of artworks for inclusion in the collection and a comparison of the national official communication strategies that accompany the donations by member states.

Such research would allow us to better understand to what extent the intentions of the UN, the nation states and the artists are reflected in the reception of these artworks. It would also demonstrate whether the collection plays a role in influencing ongoing political and/or intercultural relations. Finally, doing so would contribute to evaluating the effectiveness or lack thereof of strategies framed by the ideas of soft power and cultural diplomacy.

Notes

- 1 An argument that I apply to the modes of presentation of the UN in my doctoral thesis (*Unstable Mediation – Regarding the United Nations as a Visual Entity*, forthcoming).
- 2 In 2017, this number is 193.
- 3 The members were, at the time of Adlerstein's interview, 'Yukio Takasu, Under-Secretary-General for Management (Chairperson), Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Zainab Hawa Bangura, Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Joseph V. Reed, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General, Michael Adlerstein, Assistant Secretary-General, Capital Master Plan, Levent Bilman, Director of Policy and Mediation Division, Department of Political Affairs, Yeochol Yoon, Chief, Protocol Liaison

Service, Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG), Victor Kisob, Director, EOSG, Claudio Santangelo, Secretary of the Arts Committee' (Adlerstein 2014, p. 153).

- 4 Indeed, according to UNESCO (2010), it holds "a collection of 600 works of art by Masters such as Picasso, Miro, Arp, Appel, Afro, Matta, Calder, Chillida, Giacometti, Moore, Tamayo, Soto, Vasarely, Cruz-Diez and many others". Interestingly, the website also notes that "UNESCO's Headquarters boasts the largest artistic heritage within the United Nations systemæ," which points to the lack of a clear listing (UNIS, no date).
- 5 An argument that I develop in my Ph.D. thesis, mentioned earlier.
- 6 The relation between soft power and neoliberalism is discussed in detail by Melissa Nisbett in 'Who Holds the Power in Soft Power?' (2016).
- 7 An incident that I discuss in detail in 'Images against Images – On Goshka Macuga's The Nature of the Beast', included in *Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Art* (ed. by Carla Laban, Leuven University Press, 2013).

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